

# WALL STREET JOURNAL

U.S. News

## Neighbors Fume at Radioactive Dump

Legacy of Atomic-Era Weapons Work in St. Louis Suburb  
Stirs Worries About Health, Environment

By John R. Emswiller

Dec. 29, 2013 7:55 p.m. ET



Efforts were under way in May to cut odors from a Bridgeton, Mo., landfill. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch/Associated Press*

BRIDGETON, Mo.—A dispute is smoldering here, in one sense quite literally, over what to do with thousands of tons of radioactive waste in a landfill in this suburban St. Louis town.

## Waste Lands



Some residents argue the waste, created decades ago by the U.S. nuclear-weapons program and other federal work, poses a health and environmental threat and should be removed. The landfill's owner disputes that and says the best course is to leave the waste in place with some beefed-up protections. The Environmental Protection Agency has favored the second option but is reconsidering in reaction to community opposition.

The dispute is complicated by other factors. What officials from the EPA and the landfill's owner call a "subsurface smoldering event"—locals call it an underground fire—has sprung up in a nearby nonnuclear landfill area. It isn't clear what would happen if the smoldering reaches the radioactive materials. Efforts are under way to prevent that.

Digging up the radioactive waste, meanwhile, could cause flight-safety headaches at the nearby Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. Officials of the airport say excavating the landfill could attract birds that might pose a risk to planes. A 2010 letter from the airport authority called the landfill, known as West Lake, "a hazardous wildlife attractant."

## More

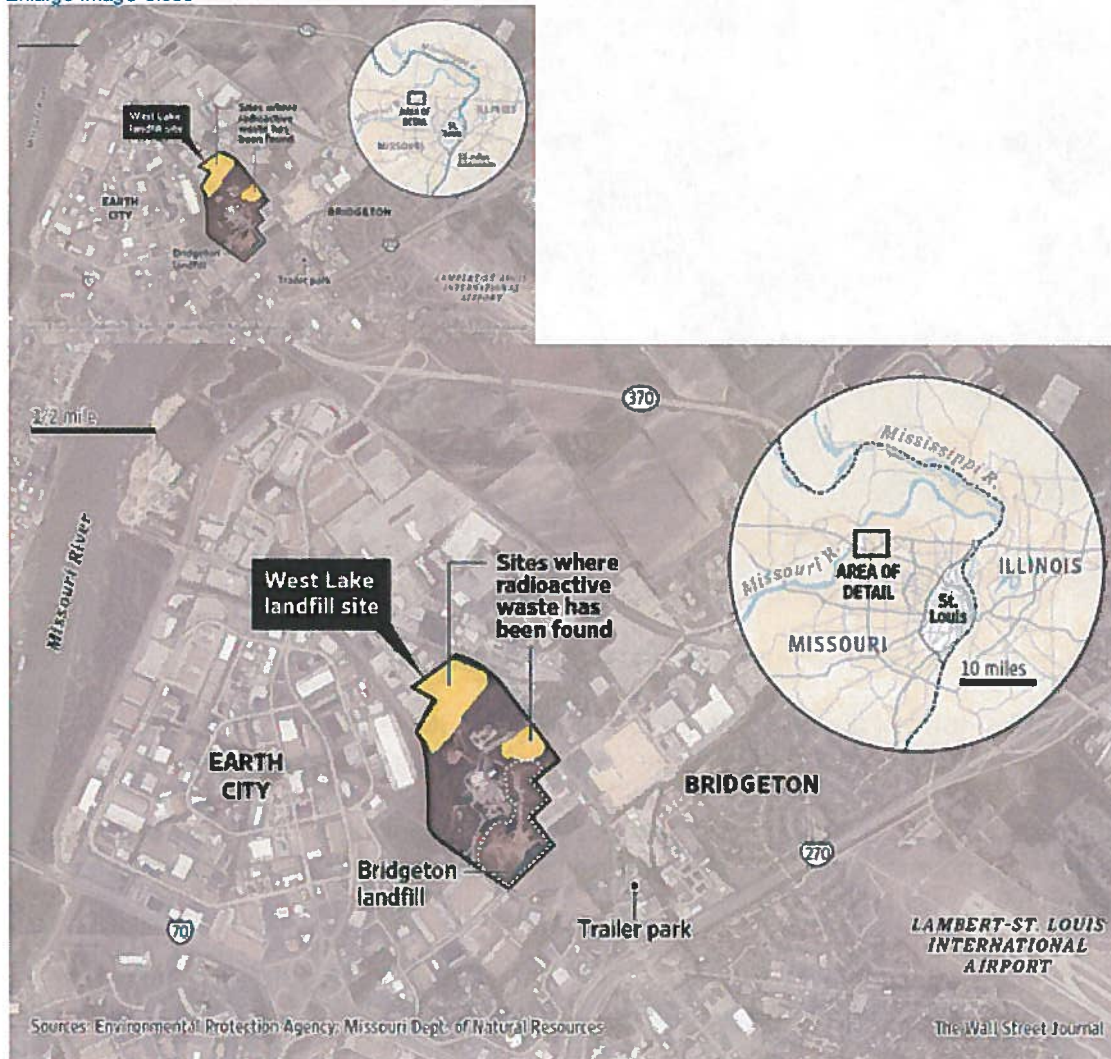
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West Lake exemplifies one of the enduring challenges created by the federal government's drive to develop nuclear weapons and other forms of atomic energy: what to do with the radioactive mess left behind.

During the past year, [The Wall Street Journal](#) has examined the government's efforts to identify and remove residual radioactivity at scores of sites involved in federal nuclear work. At dozens of locations around the country, federal and other records show, the government has yet to gather enough information to determine what to do. Cleanup jobs have had to be redone, sometimes more than once, because too much toxic material was left behind. Other

cleanup efforts have taken decades to complete. Some aren't yet done. Government officials say they are working to complete remaining cleanups as quickly as possible.

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Bridgeton's waste traces back to atomic-weapons work during World War II and early in the Cold War era, when a local chemical company, Mallinckrodt Chemical Works, processed tens of thousands of tons of uranium for the government. By the late 1940s, the government was storing waste from that work outside at a 22-acre site in the area, according to federal records and officials. In the mid-1960s, the waste was moved a short distance to another outdoor location where it sat until 1973.

These activities by the government and private parties that eventually bought the waste to extract further materials from it resulted in "widespread radioactive contamination" involving dozens of properties in the vicinity of the dump sites, according to a 2005 report by the Army Corps of Engineers, which is cleaning up those locations under a federal program for old nuclear-weapons sites, the Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program.

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Kathy Schindler, right, cited the smell at a news conference in Bridgeton in May. *Associated Press*

In 1973, about 8,700 tons of the waste were mixed with 39,000 tons of soil from one of the storage sites and hauled about 10 miles to the West Lake landfill by private parties.

Such disposal was "clearly in violation of" federal rules for disposing of nuclear waste, said a 1974 report by the now-defunct U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. Still, the waste was allowed to remain at West Lake.

In 2008, the EPA issued a decision saying the nuclear waste "can be safely managed in place." It proposed placing a cap over the site and requiring long-term surveillance and use restrictions.

Local residents, who have shown up by the hundreds at community meetings about West Lake, protested. The EPA decided to reconsider and look at alternatives, including removal of the waste to another location. Agency officials say they hope to conclude the review sometime in 2014.

"Talk about active community groups; this sets the record," says Missouri State Rep. Bill Otto, a Democrat whose district includes the landfill.

## Related Video

Patty Ameno has spent the last quarter century fighting to clean up nuclear waste in and around Apollo, her hometown in western Pennsylvania. WSJ's John Emshwiller reports. Photo: Ross Mantle for The Wall Street Journal

Among the most active residents is Dawn Chapman, a 33-year-old stay-at-home mother of three. Up to about a year ago, she says, "I didn't even know I lived near a landfill." Now, she is so involved that "my husband tells me I repeat the names of radioisotopes in my sleep."

One isotope mentioned often lately among activists is thorium-230, which can increase cancer risk if it gets inside the body. In late November, Robert Alvarez, a former Energy Department senior official in the Clinton administration and a nuclear critic, warned of dangers from the thorium levels in the West Lake waste. A populated area such as metropolitan St. Louis "would be the last place you would put a landfill with this stuff in it," he said in a recent interview. He said he produced the report after being asked by local citizens to speak about the West Lake issue at a public forum and becoming interested in the large amount of thorium that appears to be in the landfill.

[Republic Services](#) Inc., **RSG -0.35%** **Republic Services Inc.** U.S.: NYSE **\$33.76 - 0.12 -0.35%** March 28, 2014 9:33 am Volume (Delayed 15m) : 0 P/E Ratio 20.83 Market Cap \$12.22 Billion Dividend Yield 3.07% Rev. per Employee \$271,516 [12/29/13 Neighbors Fume at Radioactive ...](#) [More quote details](#)

[and news](#) » which acquired the landfill as part of buying another company in 2008, dismisses the Alvarez report as evidence of "activist organizations that are advancing their own agenda without regard to actual scientific evidence or public safety." The company favors the EPA's original plan to leave the waste in place.

The company said research to date "strongly indicates" the adjacent smoldering event wouldn't create a hazard even if it reached the radioactive material. Nonetheless, Republic has proposed digging an "isolation barrier" at the site to prevent that from happening.

EPA officials said they haven't analyzed what might happen if the smoldering reaches the atomic waste, but they back the idea of the barrier.

**Write to** John R. Emshwiller at [john.emshwiller@wsj.com](mailto:john.emshwiller@wsj.com)

